EXPLORING AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO

SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN TELEVISION NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

Self-reflexivity refers to "the process by which texts, both literary and filmic, foreground their own production, their authorship, their intertextual influences, their reception, or their enunciation" (Stam, 1985, p. xiii). This paper expands Olson's (1987) framework for discussing self-reflexive (Olson calls self-reflexivity "meta-television") statements based on the referent. This study proposes a framework also based on referent, but divides such references into four main categories of self-reflexivity (referring to the show itself, to other shows/genres, to the medium of television, and to the corporeal world) and then into sub-categories based on a textual analysis of the television show, *Boston Legal*. It also looks at the way TV audiences, and specifically audiences of *Boston Legal* read and respond to self-reflexive statements within the show. There has been much conjecture about audiences, but little qualitative research dealing with this topic.

This project found that self-reflexivity has the potential to increase the viewers' enjoyment of a show, but it also has the potential to turn viewers away from the show. Fans of *Boston Legal* indicated that self-reflexivity enhances their viewing experience, making it more enjoyable and more interactive. They also feel that self-reflexivity

enhances their relationships with the show, its creators, and its characters. Alternatively, non-viewers of *Boston Legal* (people who had never seen the show before this study) indicated feeling alienated and "turned off" by the self-reflexive references in the show. They indicated a lack of understanding and an adverse reaction to self-reflexivity. Thus, producers wanting to incorporate self-reflexive references must strike a balance between enhancing existing viewers' experiences and alienating first-time viewers with references they do not understand.